

Michelle Harven: This is Force for Hire.

Desmon Farris: A deep dive into private military contracting, and how it's transforming the battlefield.

Michelle Harven: I'm Michelle Harven.

Desmon Farris: And I'm Desmon Farris.

Desmon Farris: Welcome to another episode where we get a glimpse inside the lives of real people. For this episode we'll be hearing from wives of military contractors. We were inspired after finding a 2008 op-ed by Mary Beth Laguna. She wrote about her anger at having to deal with scrutiny and mischaracterizations after her husband's death while working for Blackwater.

Michelle Harven: We wanted to see what others experiences were like. And what was surprising is how few resources there are online for families of overseas contractors. However, I did find one, and that's how I met Barbie Baker. Her husband worked a senior chief for 21 years while Barbie was back at home doing her part.

Barbie Baker: So, for James' last duty station I was the Command Ombudsman and that is the liaison between the command staff and the family members of the military personnel stationed here at Corpus Christi. What that entailed was working with the local community outreach organizations, and the military organizations such as Fleet and Family Support Center, and the local military organizations on base, as well as the community organizations off base. Just reaching out and staying in touch with them, if they have any issues about anything from base housing, who to contact through, their spouse needs something and they don't know who to talk to, directing them who in the chain of command to go through, just stuff like that. I was very well connected and aware of organizations and groups that would provide support for military families.

Barbie Baker: My dad was a Vietnam Vet. I have been a military spouse. The opportunity to be involved and reach out and provide comfort and reassurance for the young military spouses ... I was a young military spouse once also, and there's so many unknowns, the big picture of why things happen and where they go, and are they safe, and money's tight this month, just different things like that. People joke that I bleed red, white, and blue, so any opportunity to get involved and support our military and their families, it's just a thing with me.

Barbie Baker: One of the things that I did was keep in constant contact with each of those IA's families, and try to provide support for them even though a lot of them when back home to stay with family while their sailor was deployed. I was very well connected when James retired. The chiefs mess, the brotherhood of all of that was, everybody was saying, "Whatever you need, you just let us know.", and, "We're here for you.".

Barbie Baker: It didn't seem like it was gonna be any different than any other deployment, and boy was I wrong. Because once you're not affiliated with that daily interaction, everybody gets busy doing their job, taking care of the military families that come in. I'm not by any means saying it was like ... Nobody took my calls or anything. It just is a different dynamics of being involved with the groups. The other difference when they deploy as a civilian versus being deployed as military is, there's not anybody that is providing updates for you. If you don't hear from anybody in a few days, a couple of weeks, there's somebody that is always that POC for the military deployments. And as a civilian contractor there is none of that. It definitely makes for a totally different dynamic of being in the civilian contractor situation.

Barbie Baker: In talking to friends, somebody told him that they were looking into this company and that they were doing contract air traffic control, and that they had contracts in both Bagram and Kabul. So he sent in his stuff, did his paperwork, and they said, "We'd love to have you.", and we said, "Well, we've done the long-distance and the separations several times before. We'll do that for a little while and see what the girls decide.". And then of course everybody's like, "The money's great! The money's great!", so we said, "Well, do that for a little while, save up to put some more with the girls' college funds, and sock some away so we have it when we decide what we wanna do.", and off he went.

Barbie Baker: Whenever you would meet people or talk to people and they would ask, "What does your husband do?", or something of that nature, and you would tell them, "He's in Afghanistan right now.", and they'd be like, "Oh, oh my goodness. What is he doing?", "Well, he's a civilian contractor.", and they'd, "Oh. Oh. That's what he's doing?", "Yeah.". So the public perception of what that is, is just, I think people over there rolling around on cash living the high life and so there wasn't really any compassion or that reaching out to be supportive of being worried about them while they're gone, the stress of that worry plus taking care of everything at home, raising teenagers by yourself, and girls at that. It was like, "Oh, well at least the money's good.", that's what I heard 90% of the time is, "Oh, well. The money's good.".

Barbie Baker: After a while you get to where, if your brain works like mine it's like, "Okay, I'm not really seeing this huge influx in", I'm gonna say revenue, just for lack of better words, "I'm not seeing a huge increase in funds.", because when you're military and you do something, every expense is covered. When you travel ... All these things. Medical, insurance, every bit of it is covered.

Barbie Baker: When you start with a military salary at the bottom of a ruler, and the civilian contractor salary at the top of the ruler and then you add to the military salary the fact you've got insurance paid, medical paid, travel paid, you keep moving up an inch at a time. Then for the civilian contractor salary those things that are benefits to military are now expenses to civilians. So you take out that same list of things, and you move that one down an inch at a time, when you get done you're really running pretty close to even on what military personnel made. It just got to the point where it was kind of insulting. Where it's like, "Really?". You

deploy as military, which James did, so again, I'm not bashing military. Every support that is there for the military is amazing and if it were up to me, there would be more. My whole point is that civilian contractors are not ... They're not less because they're deployed civilian contractors.

Barbie Baker: Within that first month I was just flat out depressed. Like I said, it's going from a constant support environment to basically just like, "You are on your own.". And of course, nights being the worst time because the events are done, you're home from work if you do that, or things are closed. There's only so many times you can go shopping at Walmart at midnight to try to pass the time. That is when I went to Facebook online and started searching and saying ... I was never big into those, but I remember when I was younger, much younger than when James went to Afghanistan, they had the chatrooms and stuff online, and different deals that you could go communicate with people.

Barbie Baker: I went online and I couldn't find anything, any type of network at all for deployed civilian contractor family, friends, anything of that nature. So when I went on Facebook and tried searching, I found all sorts things for military spouses, and for stuff of that nature, but nothing for contractors. And I knew there was tons of them, just the ones I knew that were in the company that James was with. So I went online and created a Facebook page, and I just called it, "Family and Friends of Deployed Civilian Contractors.", not really knowing how a lot of that stuff worked, I created the page and then I shared it on my page and said, "Hey, if anybody is up at midnight and wants to chat with me, let me know! I'll be on this page.".

Barbie Baker: I'm just not the type to sit back and accept that there's not something if it's something that ... I don't mean that to sound selfish. If it's something I need I'm gonna go create it. And knowing that there's no way that I was the only one, there's no way I was the only one that felt that way. I consider myself unique, but I don't consider myself that unique. I honestly think that people felt ... And some of them probably still do ... Felt guilty for feeling like there was something missing.

Barbie Baker: Again, the social perception of military contractors is that they're living the high life, hotels, having fun, working, doing their little fun job. Air traffic control is one of those jobs that a lot of people ... When people would ask James what he does, he'd say, "Air traffic control.". He spent eight years at sea during his 21 years. So, when you say, "Air traffic controller, civilian contractor.", you're like, "Oh really? They're making tons of money to stand in a tower and drink coffee, and watch planes land and takeoff?". So I think that that is probably a lot of the reason why people didn't reach out, because they didn't want to be ridiculed or put down. "You chose this. You chose to have this separation for all that money.". Those things I think would be a big deterrent for somebody to reach out. I think the reason that I probably didn't have a problem doing it is because I've never had a problem defending the contractor spouses and what it's really like for some. So, a few friends liked it, and then they shared it and-

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Barbie Baker: Friends liked it and then they shared it and it wasn't even a week and there were several people that had joined it. And gosh, that first three, four months that the page was up I had people from all over the United States that had been searching and found the page and liked it. And there were several, several hundred that that had joined it. But there was a group of about seven or eight of us that talked multiple times a day. And I to this day still credit those ladies as how I made it through sanely. Some would probably argue with that, but I'm going to stick with it. We called each other DCC sisters, deployed civilian contractors. So that was probably my favorite part of all of it.

Barbie Baker: Our family, we're firm believers in everything happens for a reason. And the things that happen and the things that you do, you find out sometimes the path wasn't just about you. And this has been probably one of the biggest validations of that because again, like I said, there's so many of them that that is their family. And unfortunately, I will say the lifestyle is super, super hard. I think five of the nine of our original group divorced within a year of their spouse deploying. And that is heartbreaking, but we're all still friends to this day. I mean, people still join the page all the time. I mean, it's up to almost 1,500 followers of the page. And to me that's kind of awesome. And the analytics of it show that it is people all over the United States and there's even a few that are overseas. It started getting more attention after awhile, right before James left, because everybody that came in, he would tell them about it to tell their spouses. To this day, the majority of us still keep in touch and there's only one of us that I know of, Nicole, whose husband is still doing the civilian contractor life.

Nicole Woodland: Wife of a contractor for nine plus years. We kind of met in a roundabout way. We started chatting and come to find out, I actually had done EKGs on him when he was 10 years old. When he was a little boy he accidentally caught himself on fire and he was severely burned. He had filled a paint can with gas. Fast forward, like 17 years later, we came in contact with each other and we're like okay, that's crazy. I remembered him as a little boy. As soon as he said that he'd been in the burn unit I was like oh my gosh, you're this one and you were in this room. So that was just kind of crazy. So we were like well, we should meet.

Nicole Woodland: So as soon as he walked in I was like oh no. Because I just knew. And we ended up getting married a couple of months later. That is actually part of why he's a contractor. So he was in the military for a short period of time, gone through basic and someone else died when they were running. And that person died because their sweat glands had been compromised due to burns. And so they came through and said if you hadn't been in for like a long time and if you had more than 30% of your body burned, it didn't matter whether your sweat glands were compromised or not.

Nicole Woodland: And it wasn't, I mean they knew everything going into it when he had done all the testing and everything and they had had it cleared because his sweat glands

weren't compromised at all. And so it didn't really cause a problem for him sweating or not, but they just kind of came through and said nope, if you have more than 30% burns or not, you have to take a medical discharge. Which was good for me. Because then he came home and then it was several years later after that that we actually met. And then an opportunity came up for him to go work overseas. So that's kind of how the whole contractor thing even happened, because he had wanted to be in the military, he had wanted to do special forces and stuff. But then it just kind of, that life took a different turn and it worked out for us. Just decided to look into it and it mean we thought it would take months. So it was within five or six weeks that he was gone. And that was nine plus years ago. That was nine years ago in October.

Nicole Woodland: I come from a military family. My father was in the Marines. I have an older brother. We were four years apart and he was in the Army. And he actually died in [Bomb Holder 00:18:23] during a training exercise. Kind of knew what we were getting into. But the one thing that was really lacking for us was that for contractors families, there's not really any support. So as a military family, you have different groups, on what branch you're in and bases or even in Guard, they still have things for families to really help them out and to counsel and to make sure that everybody has kind of taken care of. I wasn't just kind of left out in the dark.

Nicole Woodland: But I think that's the one thing for a lot of people and especially if they don't have any background with it, and I've seen that because through the group on Facebook, The Families of Contractors, I saw kind of all across the board, people that had a really hard time with it. People that didn't. And it really, I think from the moment they leave, you really have to have the mindset that you just have to live day to day life. I think one of the biggest thing that happens is that people focus on the time apart and don't focus on living.

Nicole Woodland: I was playing in a woman's volleyball league and I met a lady whose husband had just recently died. And I was talking about how oh, I'm not going to see my husband for nine months or whatever, because now it's every six months. But when he first left, we didn't know what our schedule is going to be like. Then I was thinking talking to her and I'm like I will never complain because I'm going to see my husband. I can talk to my husband every day. And I think that that was put in my way from the very beginning so that I would change my mindset to that because so much of it is a mindset. And so it just really made me focus on living and not complaining or being upset because we were apart.

Nicole Woodland: So I had a daughter from a previous marriage and she was in eighth grade, so whatever age that makes her, probably, she's 22 now. But I think that being a single mom for six and a half years had really prepared me for being apart from my husband. And we have a wonderful relationship. I think that that's when a lot of people have a hard time also is when they don't have a good relationship. And we're also very fortunate that we're able to talk every day. So our normal mode of communication is he'll message me on Facebook when he's available.

And then we Skype. It's a godsend. It's a total lifesaver. I mean, we talk for a couple hours a day because of Skype, which is really nice.

Nicole Woodland: And so we just had Sarah at the time and she was in eighth grade. And then from the moment we got married, we struggled with infertility, which is also part of the reason he took the job, was because we wanted it to be able to afford any means that we need to do because we wanted children. And we suffered through infertility for six years. We ended up doing some basic infertility stuff. And then we had to do full out infertility. So we did three full rounds of infertility.

Nicole Woodland: So our first round took for about a minute, about a week, and then I miscarried and then our second one I just kind of knew that it wasn't going to. So then we did a third round right away and that's the one that took. And we ended up having twins. And it was, it's hard to say because we went through the pregnancy apart, but in some ways because I was on modified bed rest the whole time, because I have a lot of different things going on. Some days it made it a lot easier because I didn't have to worry about how he also felt emotionally or cooking dinner for a family every night or things like that. I mean, it was awful too because we didn't get to be together. I mean, he was home once and then at the very, I think, beginning. Then he, a contractor and with this company, he can usually schedule his time off. But it was when we were going through the draw down before, so this was four years ago in October. And so there was a period of time where no one could take leave.

Nicole Woodland: So our little girl, she was baby B, she stopped growing at 35 weeks. I had a fibroid blocking her placenta, which we had kind of been watching the whole pregnancy. And then baby A had a tear in the placenta so I would bleed all the time. And so it was a hard pregnancy, just extremely emotionally up and down. Sometimes my fluids would go down and they'd be worried and then they'd go back up. We knew if anything happened, what the channels were that we needed to do.

Nicole Woodland: So at 35 weeks she stopped growing. And , I had to contact the Red Cross and then the Red Cross had to contact, so then they had to talk to our doctor's office and then it had to go through a series of commands. So it had to go to one country and get approval and then it had to go in country and get approval and he made it out within 30 minutes. If they wouldn't have gotten the approval, he wouldn't have made it home for the birth. And so we already had everything set up. Like my doctor's office, they knew that they were going to have to talk to the people in command and we knew exactly who to call at the Red Cross. So we kind of had all the ducks in order. And he made it home on Wednesday afternoon about 3:00. And then I had a C section on Thursday afternoon. But if he wouldn't have made it out on that particular flight, then he wouldn't have made it home in time. And then they were in NICU the for the whole time he was home. They were born on October 23rd and then had to go back on I think November 10th or something.

Nicole Woodland: I had twins. At the time my mom didn't live here, she just barely moved here, which is so wonderful. But I had no family, no help and two newborns. She did come and stay with me for two weeks. So that definitely helped. But I look back and it's kind of all a blur. But I think everything along the way kind of prepared me. So it was crazy. And now they're crazy. Now they run around and are nonstop.

Nicole Woodland: They just turned four in October and it's getting harder. We're looking at hoping that he's home by the time they go to kindergarten. So they have October birthdays, so they won't go next year, but they'll go the following year. And so we're really hoping that if everything pans out, that he's actually home by then because it gets harder and harder and they miss him. And now they can verbalize more. Like our daughter will ask for him like oh, can't daddy come home? So we have Nest cams in our home, in their room, so he can see them and talk to them like when they're going to bed. And then we have two other Nest cams in their lay areas so that he can watch them and stuff like that.

Nicole Woodland: And then we have Skype, like we have an Alexis show in our kitchen that they can Skype with him on. They definitely know what Skype is. Because we use it so much. But it's nice, the Nest cam that's in their bedroom, like he can talk to them on it. So if they're doing something he can be like, go to bed. Which technology is great in that sense. But it never makes up for being in person and being able to hug and kiss and hold hands or go on little daddy daughter dates or stuff like that.

Nicole Woodland: So last time he was home, it was actually three weeks. He took a little bit longer. And when I talk about it, it sounds crazy, but it's what we've done for so long and it's all that our kids know. And he absolutely loves what he does. And so a lot of people come home and they're like oh, I really miss being over there because just like anyone in the military also ...

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Nicole Woodland: ... because just like anyone in the military also, when you've been deployed for so long, you look at people that have served six, seven tours, it's hard coming home, and he's worked in a war zone now for over nine years. It will definitely be an adjustment when he comes home. He lives behind a gate and lives in a tiny ... living conditions, they're not deplorable for contractors but they are kind of at the end of the line for of the pecking order. It's kind of like if you or I lived in our closet all the time. It'd be really hard. And then you come home to ... or if you went and lived in a third world country for a period of time and then you come home to all the normal, modern day luxuries. You love it, but it's very overstimulating also.

Nicole Woodland: There are may moments when I've sat in my closet and cried. It's hard. It's been really hard on my health, I think is part of it. I have meningitis and I just ... I try to stay healthy but the stress of it being ... but I do know what it's like to be a single mom also and have the stress of that and I don't have the stress of being

a single mom and having the financial stress. But not having ... you don't get married and have kids thinking "Oh, they're not gonna be here." So even though we still parent together, that is one aspect that's really hard is because I don't have where I can be like "Okay, I really need a break. I'm just gonna run to the store. Go play with your kids." I don't get that. That's the hardest part is being able to kind of stay in check. And when I do get super overwhelmed, not to take it out on my kids or not to take it out on him, which I do. We're a normal couple. We can still fight 7000 miles away.

Nicole Woodland: Like yesterday, I asked him for a password 'cause I needed to setup my mom ... I'm getting ready to go on vacation. My first vacation just for me since I had kids 22 year ago. But my mom's gonna take care of my kids so I wanted to set up one of our tablets in the kitchen so she can watch them on Nest Cam. So I just said ... I couldn't remember what our login was. So I just asked for a login, and him being the sweet husband that he is, he was like "Oh, I can setup a user name and everything for her." And I'm like "No, that's not what I want. I just need the password." Like I just want it up and running on the tablet all the time. She doesn't need to log in and out of it. It's little things like that where you ... and I was in the middle of doing a bunch of stuff and I was like "Ah, please." We still have the normal things.

Nicole Woodland: My husband can wiggle his ears. So sometimes when we're having a discussion over Skype on video, he likes to still, as if he was here, trying to make light of whatever it was, and he'll wiggle his ears at me. And it's really hard to argue with someone when they're wiggling their ears at you.

Nicole Woodland: I think it's a fine line of being positive and not positive and still being real. So one of the hardest times for me was when he was home after our first ... after we did our first round of invetro, and we were down in our theater room watching that and I started cramping. It was super hard for me to miscarry but it was even harder because he was home and ... I mean, it was great in a sense because he was home and he could be there for me and yet it was so hard for me to see the pain in his eyes. And for him to ... because I mean, it took us so long and then we were so excited and he just happened to be home for that transfer and then to have him be there when we found out that ... I knew right then and I could see the little clot and so that part was super hard because it wasn't ... I couldn't just like pretend that it wasn't hard and I had to really be raw and sometimes that's hard.

Nicole Woodland: When you get so used to not being raw all the time because you try to be strong all the time, those are the moments that are difficult.

Nicole Woodland: I don't try and hide anything or anything like that but it was just one moment that I can really think of that was really hard for us. It was very connecting for us but it was also really hard and because he was leaving like a few days later.

Nicole Woodland: And then there are moments that you're glad they're home. We had a flight change once. Our kids had to have ... they had tongue and lip ties and they had

to have them lasered and it just so happened that his flight got delayed and so then they were able to change it to the next day and he was actually able to go to the pediatric dentist with me for the procedure. So he was able to be in the room with them and I just had to stand in the room listening to my kids cry as they had the procedure done. It's a flip side. Sometimes it's rally hard when they're home, and sometimes it's a huge blessing for moments like that.

Nicole Woodland: 'Cause I'm a very social person, research is ... I started looking and you do just a general Google search and there was nothing. And the person that started the Families of Contractors page, she had just barely started it. It might have been a month. It was in its infancy. I'm so thankful to her. Her name is Barbie, and she lives in Corpus Christi. Her husband had been ... I think he was retired from the military and then he was a contractor, which is usually what happens. There's a lot of people that are retired military and then go back.

Nicole Woodland: Those ladies from the very beginning of it ... and it kind of dies down, fizzled out after a couple years, but there's probably still about 10 or 12 of us from the original group when it first started that we still talk on Facebook or over chat or whatever, that we still kind of follow one another's lives. But it helped tremendously in the beginning to be able to have that. Sometimes our husbands' lives would intersect and they'd see each other. It was a great resource, and everybody sends messages or tells their kids happy birthday. It's been really interesting now to see everybody kind of ... I think out of the original group, I think my husband is the only one that's still there. I think my husband is probably one of the longest contractors out there.

Nicole Woodland: Just to kind of see everybody come home and go to modern day life ... even though I didn't have a military type support, I did search out and still find that. We have great friends that always check on me. My in-laws live ... we don't interact a ton but if I need something, they'll come up. My father-in-law came up a couple days ago and fixed the winch on our four wheeler 'cause we've had a lot of snow this winter. So just little things like that. I've always have had neighbors that have checked on me. I was very involve in my daughter at the time when she was in junior high and high school. So I always tried to stay busy and involved in things.

Nicole Woodland: Here in our community, there might be maybe one or two other people that I know of that their husbands are contractors. It's not ... like when National Guard was deployed from here, which there was a unit that was deployed when my husband left. So you had a hundred families that were effected. So there was that base that they had, whereas with us, it was all across the country. So you just kind of had to seek that out yourself and find that support.

Nicole Woodland: So everybody's from different places so for example, Barbie was from Texas. Another person lived in Kentucky. Someone else was in New York. Everybody's kind of all across the way.

Nicole Woodland: I think the number one thing for me that is super hard is that ... and people make comments on it of we just do it for the money. I mean the money's great and I'm never going to discount that the money's good, and I ... I had a really hard time in the beginning when people would say "Oh, thank you for your service," because it makes me very concerned and disheartened when I think about how much our military people are ... people that are enlisted, how little they get paid for what they do. And even though when they're deployed, they're getting hardship pay and whatnot, but there are a lot of people that suffer that have a hard time surviving on military pay.

Nicole Woodland: It was really hard for me when people would say "Oh, thank you for your service," because I felt like "Oh, I wish we could do more for our military." But on the flip side of that, that's probably, over the years, one of the things that is super hard for me is when people tell me that we do it for the money because there's no amount of money in the world, or at least for our family, for our beliefs, for our personalities, that would constitute us being apart and going through the struggles that we do for the money. The main reason that we do it is because my husband truly believes in his job and that it's helping support our military.

Nicole Woodland: Yeah, the money's great, but if he didn't love what he did and if he didn't feel like it made a difference, then he would come home and take another job. In a heartbeat. That's the biggest stigma that I think is really hard, and I don't think that people understand.

Nicole Woodland: Well, for the most part, I think that a lot of people in our society just try to pretend that we're not still at war, but they don't really understand all the different jobs that it takes to function. When they think about the military, they just think about like infantry or fighter pilots or different things like that. They don't really think about how it takes pretty much everything that you have in a normal community to run an operation and all the little things that go into that. So I think a lot of times they don't think about the living conditions. They think that because ... one of the biggest stigmas is people think that because they're contractors and they make money that they probably have the best living conditions, and that's definitely not the case. And there are moms, especially military moms or spouses that are sitting at home wondering everyday if they're going to get that knock on the door that their loved one has been killed. And that's the reality of war.

Desmon Farris: What did you learn while listening to their stories when you were talking to them? Like Barbie, when you were listening to her or talking to her?

Michelle Harven: This was interesting 'cause she was the one who built the Facebook community for other people like Nicole, who's husband has been a contractor now for nine plus years.

Desmon Farris: But it's great that she was able to create something that was beneficial to others as well.

Michelle Harven: Yes, she was like the doer and then everyone else benefited from that.

Desmon Farris: What about when you talked to Nicole?

Michelle Harven: Nicole, it was like hearing the struggles from a military wife. Like she talks about normal things like just being at home and dealing with kids without having someone there.

Desmon Farris: That's great the insight Nicole was able to get that she probably shares with a lot more spouses than she realizes.

Michelle Harven: Yeah. No, it's true.

Michelle Harven: Thanks to Barbie Baker and Nicole Woodland for sharing their experiences.

Desmon Farris: Don't forget to subscribe and while you're there, leave us a review and let us know your thoughts at podcast@stripes.com or find us on Twitter @starsandstripes.

Michelle Harven: Force For Hire's supervising editors are Bob Reed and Terry Leonard. Digital team lead and editor is Michael Darnell.

Desmon Farris: And we'll be back next time with our re-enlistment episode. Listen to hear about the transition from service member to contractor. And we'll talk about what it's like trying to join the workforce today.

Desmon Farris: Thanks for listening.

Tag: This is Force For Hire.

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